Mind matters

RoSPA's OSH policy adviser, **Karen McDonnell**, discusses how employers can better support the mental health of their workforce.

"Underneath the stigma that surrounds mental health and prevents open discussion on the subject, the UK faces a significant mental health challenge at work," states the opening paragraph of *Thriving at Work*[1]**, the report published following the Stevenson/Farmer review into how employers can better support the mental health of all people in employment.**

The report makes for particularly worrying reading. For example, it states that, in addition to the personal cost for individuals and the impact on those around them, the financial cost of poor mental health in the workplace for employers is between £33 and £42 billion each year, while the annual cost to the Government is estimated at between £24 and £27 billion. This puts the cost to the whole economy at somewhere between £74 and £99 billion each and every year.

"...the inescapable conclusion is that it is massively in the interest of both employers and Government to prioritise and invest far more in improving mental health. The UK can ill afford the productivity cost of this poor mental health," the report states.

Its authors, Paul Farmer, the chief executive of mental health charity Mind, and Lord Dennis Stevenson, conclude that, as part of their 10-year vision they want to see employees

engaged in *"good work"* which contributes positively to their mental health.

To achieve this, the report sets out "mental health core standards" for employers, which the authors describe as *"a framework for a set of actions which we believe all organisations in the country are capable of implementing quickly"*.

The mental health core standards are:

- Produce, implement and communicate a mental health at work plan.
- Develop mental health awareness among employees.
- Encourage open conversations about mental health and the support available when employees are struggling.
- Provide employees with good working conditions and ensure they have a healthy work/life balance and opportunities for development.
- Promote effective people management through line managers and supervisors.
- Routinely monitor employee mental health and wellbeing.

At RoSPA, we welcome the report's recommendations. We recognise that good work is good for people - and good for business. Employers must identify and manage the significant risks to the wellbeing of their staff. There is plenty of free guidance out there to help. For instance, the guidance

produced by Healthy Working Lives[2] in Scotland is concise and pragmatic, and is grounded in real experiences and practice.

But, and this is a big but, the understanding of the fundamental importance of mental ill health prevention is still not sufficiently recognised – including by some health professionals in the NHS, particularly those in primary care.

Prevention is key and in the workplace RoSPA would like to see a renewed campaign to embed coverage of HSE's Stress Management Standards[3] (which have not yet been adequately promoted) in the training and continuing professional development of all managers, workers' representatives and health and safety professionals.

In terms of enforcement, we would also like to see HSE, where appropriate, using their powers to require businesses where work-related stress is a significant issue to introduce mental health change programmes - under the supervision of outside experts if necessary.

In addition, there's a need to improve the level of access employees have to suitable occupational health (OH) services and support. While occupational health is well developed in many larger businesses, many workers, particularly those in small and medium-sized firms, still do not have access

to a suitably trained or empowered occupational health professional.

We feel that addressing these concerns would go some way to achieving the recommendations resulting from the Stevenson/Farmer review.

And while the financial costs of mental health are stark, the impact of ill health on the individual involved and their family and friends can be devastating. Most of you reading this will know someone directly or indirectly affected by a mental health issue. I certainly do. But I've also had the immense privilege of meeting and working with people who have come through to recover from their illnesses, as well as those who have supported them through the process. These individuals are inspiring.

For instance, at this year's Safety and Health Expo I was fortunate to meet Dave Lee, who was sitting on a panel discussion that I was chairing. Formerly in construction, the stresses of the job and looking after a young family took their toll on his mental health, and he turned to alcohol in an effort to ease the burden.

Now, having learnt new coping tools, Dave has written a book called *The hairy arsed builder's guide to stress management*[4] and co-founded a firm which provides training in mental health, wellbeing, stress manage-

ment and other issues across industries including construction and utilities.

He is passionate and completely committed to getting employees to open up about their mental health issues (a particular problem on the country's construction sites, he says) and to ensuring that employers are equipped to support them when they do.

It's people like Dave that we need to turn to if the country is serious about tackling it's mental health and productivity issues, not just for his passion and expertise, but also for his insight into what we can really do on a practical level to support those dealing with mental health issues.

For any employers (and indeed employees) reading this I'd also highly recommend engaging with See Me[5] (for those in Scotland) and Mind (across the UK)[6], while Big White Wall[7] is an online mental health and wellbeing service offering self-help programmes.

See Me succinctly sums up the action needed to be taken by employers to address mental ill health issues in the workplace in the following quote which is on its website:

"While many organisations understand the impact of mental health in the workplace, it can be challenging to create a mentally-healthy working environment. There is a strong business case for getting it right on mental health in work. Eliminating stigma

and discrimination is key. It requires a joined up approach and a genuine commitment to support staff to make it okay to talk about mental health."

References

1. *Thriving at work. The Stevenson / Farmer review of mental health and employers.* **www.gov.uk/government/publications/thriving-at-work-a-review-of-mental-health-and-employers**
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3. **www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards**
4. **www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCHJuCGDV8w**
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